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The Unfocused Focus Group: Benefit or Bane?

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Facilitating successful focus groups requires both science and art. One element that can fully challenge focus group facilitators includes how to handle the unfocused focus group. This article describes "unfocus" and the benefits and disadvantages of unfocus in focus groups. Lessons learned from and approaches taken on this journey are shared to enhance focus group facilitation best practices. Key Words: Focus Groups, Facilitation, Group Process, Context, Unfocus.

Focus groups have become increasingly popular for garnering information from select audiences on a particular topic (Larson, Grudens-Schuck, & Allen, 2004; Krueger & Casey, 2009). After 25 years of using focus groups for needs assessment, program evaluation, and social science research, I have noticed an important phenomenon. Sometimes the most interesting insights on the topic of study emerge from what I call "the unfocused focus group." I define unfocus in a focus group as substantive discussion on topics not directly tied to the goals of the project. Sometimes the group repeatedly moves away from the intended discussion even though a skilled facilitator is present. As a facilitator of these groups, I was taught to keep a tight rein on the process by sticking to the interview protocol to obtain the best results. However, I increasingly find that unfocused conversations in focus groups can reveal important insights into the topic, the group's culture, the busy and messy context of life, and the value of the group experience for participants.

Facilitating successful focus groups requires both science and art. One element that can fully challenge focus group facilitators includes how to handle the unfocused focus group. This article describes "unfocus," and the benefits and disadvantages of unfocus in focus groups. Lessons learned from and approaches taken on this journey are shared to enhance focus group facilitation best practices.

Focus Groups

The Value of Focus Groups

Krueger and Casey (2009) define a focus group as a "carefully planned series of discussions to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (p. 2). Focus groups were used during World War II to monitor the pulse of public response to wartime propaganda (Nassar-McMillan & Borders, 2002). Since then, focus groups have been used for market research, decision-making, product or program development, customer satisfaction, goal setting, policy making and testing, needs assessment, and as a research tool to listen and gather information to determine how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service (Krueger & Casey).

Some social science researchers find focus groups provide an important venue for participatory studies where under heard people are given an opportunity to provide direct

information on a particular phenomenon. These groups allow for rich discussion between participants who build on each other's comments and hold each other accountable for the veracity of what is said based on their own experience (Linville, Lambert-Shute, Fruhauf & Piercy, 2003). Researchers often use focus groups as part of their methodology, alone or with other research methods, since they can gather substantial information in a short period and hear directly from those with the perspective they need (Krueger, 1988; Linville et al., 2003). In addition, Krueger finds researchers can get "believable results at a reasonable cost" (p. 20).

Focus groups are used by decision makers to evaluate their organization or its programs (Krueger, 1988; Linville et al., 2003; Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004). Participation in a focus group can result in increased engagement for and prevent conflict on issues or decisions being considered by meeting participants on their own turf (Holz-Clause & Jost, 1995; House & Howe, 1999; Linville et al.). Focus group discussions can lead to innovation and improvement of a program or organization (House & Howe). However, most importantly people enjoy focus groups. Krueger (2007) believes, "The magic of a focus group is that people feel comfortable" (p. 2). Specifically Madriz (2000) finds, "the interaction occurring within the group accentuates empathy and commonality of experiences and fosters self-disclosure and self-validation" (p. 842) resulting in an empowering environment. Some social science researchers also use focus groups simply for the value of observing people interact on a subject or to examine the cultural knowledge of a group (Soklaridis, 2009).

Focus Group Participants

The selection of focus group participants can determine the usefulness of the group discussion. Participants for the group should be selected based on characteristics they have in common related to the purpose of the study or project. This may include homogeneity in occupation, social class, level of education, or family characteristics (Kreuger & Casey, 2009). Highly differing characteristics can decrease the value of the data since people tend to censor their own ideas when faced with opposition (Kreuger, 1988; Grudens-Schuck et al., 2004). Participants should also be unfamiliar with each other since familiarity can inhibit disclosure, promote an established way of relating to each other, and may make it difficult to determine what influences the participants (Kreuger, 1988).

The size of effective groups ranges from four to 12 participants, with the ideal size being seven to ten individuals (Krueger, 1988; Linville et al., 2003; Smithson, 2008; Krueger & Casey, 2009). Groups should be small enough for everyone to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and large enough to provide a diversity of perspectives (Krueger). Multiple focus groups on the same topic are suggested to balance out the idiosyncrasies of individuals and groups and to include enough people who can best provide information and insight on what is being explored (Krueger).

Focus Group Facilitation Best Practices

The value of focus group discussion often relates directly to the skills and background of the facilitator (Allen, Grudens-Schuck, & Larson, 2004). Krueger and

Casey (2009) have found focus group facilitation best practices include respect for participants, empathy, background knowledge on the topic being discussed, clear written and oral communication, good listening skills, the ability to control personal views, a sense of humor, and the ability to handle unexpected situations. Krueger (1988; 2007) elaborates by suggesting the facilitator needs to use a variety of strategies to get participants fully involved in the conversation to connect with emotions, attitudes, and unconscious behaviors. He suggests this occurs by asking good questions, using skillful probing, pauses, comments, and body language including eye contact, and knowing when and how to move on to a new topic. Culver (2007) also suggests facilitators are successful when they keep the conversation moving, balance opinions in the group, encourage participation, paraphrase responses to ensure accuracy, and track and review strands of the conversation as the group proceeds. In summary, the best facilitators find ways to quickly adapt to the environment and culture of each group (Krueger, 2007).

Linville et al. (2003) in their work with focus groups for participatory research found facilitation best practices require the facilitator to be inclusive by involving everyone in the discussion. They suggest rich data are produced by limiting the number of topics discussed by the group, focusing on the issues instead of people, encouraging both positive and negative feedback, dealing effectively with highly negative feedback, discussing obvious issues, and being directive if necessary. Above all they suggest an inclusive approach should "honor the knowledge and experience of people who typically do not have a voice" (p. 219) so they feel empowered to share their experiences. Particular wording and the use of humor with these groups needs to be appropriate for the context of the participants' lives (Larson et al., 2004). Quality data from under represented groups can be enhanced by selecting a facilitator with a background similar to the participants resulting in awareness of the participant's lives, detecting what is not being said, and better understanding group behavior (Smithson, 2000).

Focus group facilitation best practices are often amplified by the art of asking questions. Facilitators need to be prepared, refrain from asking "why" questions that participants may be unable to answer, and avoid dichotomous questions (Krueger, 1988). Successful facilitators have studied background information on the questions being asked, have explored the context driving the questions, and have pilot tested the questions with a group similar to those being studied and then adjusted the protocol (Krueger).

Facilitation Issues

The art and science of focus group success often mixes when issues arise. Researchers have found the naturalistic nature of focus groups provides more surprises for research than other research methods (Grudens-Schuck et al., 2004: Krueger & Casey, 2009). Krueger and Casey suggest weather, attendance, the venue, non-participants in the room, a nonverbal group, an overly verbal group, experts, dominant talkers, shy participants, ramblers, and timing of questions can create difficulties for facilitators. Additional issues may include participants being reluctant to share their thoughts with others present, the insider status of the facilitator, group authenticity, social norms practiced by the group, participant concerns about confidentiality, anonymity, and potential repercussions resulting from stating their opinions (Madriz, 2000; Linville et al., 2003; Grudens-Schuck et al.; Smithson, 2008; Soklaridis, 2009). Suggestions for

facilitators to deal with these issues include being prepared by learning about groups and participants ahead of time, effectively using pauses and probes, preventing persuasion or conversion of opinions within the group, staying away from hot topics that produce extremely strong feelings, and fostering natural discussion rather than an artificial performance from the group (Grudens-Schuck et al.; Smithson; Krueger & Casey).

Focus Versus Unfocus in a Group

Focus group facilitators often struggle with group interaction on the degree to which they should allow the group to stray from the interview questions (Piercy, Franz, Donaldson & Richard, 2011). The literature provides mixed advice on this dilemma. Krueger (2007) believes the facilitator should stay on topic and deal with rambling participants since the discussion needs to be narrow and focused to stay true to the intent of this research method. However, he admits that focus groups have less control over groups than other methods since the group influences the discussion (Krueger, 1988). He suggests the facilitator in these cases should keep the group focused and refrain from using untrained facilitators who may allow wandering discussion.

Grudens-Schuck et al. (2004) suggest it is important to keep participants from moving discussion in particular directions. However, they believe the facilitator should balance the control of the group between the facilitator and the group participants to produce important insights on human behavior. They suggest participants "have their say" rather than constantly being focused on the interview guide. They promote using probes to dig deeper to help create this balance. Smithson (2008) also shares this view by stating that research interests are best met by providing a balance between the research protocol and healthy discussion by participants.

Some researchers find giving a large degree of control of the focus group discussion to group participants is beneficial. Madriz (2000) states:

> On many occasions the participants moved away from the interview guide, tapping into areas of the topic that I had not previously considered. The process added a wealth of information to my research and gave me new insights (p. 846).

She suggests this unfocus might be helpful for other researchers to explore to improve data produced from focus groups.

Causes and Examples of Unfocus

Unfocus is often caused from assembling a focus group that is too diverse to allow a controlled discussion on the phenomenon. I have also found that background noise or critical events in the group's culture creates unfocus. This often stems from recent or cumulative personal or professional events taking place in the group's environment related to environmental, economic, or social forces.

Promotion and Tenure Noise

One focus group I conducted assembled almost a dozen faculty members on a campus to discuss university engagement with communities and industry. Faculty gave examples of successful community engagement projects and their thoughts about conducting engagement work. The group was adamant that the promotion and tenure culture on campus did not promote engagement work. They felt it worked against them. This was not a unique perspective; however, this group failed to move on from this topic to address the remaining questions about engagement efforts. Even though I tried to bring the group back on topic numerous times, they continued to point out the woes of the promotion and tenure (P&T) culture including the words and actions of university administrators in not supporting engagement work for P&T. At one point I stated it was clear that the conflict between promotion and tenure and engagement was important to them. I noted that I had recorded their thoughts and that we needed to move on. In spite of this prompt, the group failed to return to the focus of the project. It turned into a complaint session that when listened to later spoke directly to a core concern not as passionately discussed by the other focus groups. After this experience I realized this group produced very important insights about their campus that shaped recommendations to this university on supporting faculty engagement with communities. It led to discovering that what the P&T guidelines said and what the faculty experienced about community engagement were two very different things.

Budget Strains on Learning from Each Other

Another focus group that quickly became unfocused included ten cooperative Extension Agents and specialists discussing how farmers prefer to learn new information and skills and what that meant for these professionals' educational program delivery. (For more information including dialogue from this project see Piercy et al., 2011). Soon after I posed the first question to the group about farmer learning, they decided instead that they preferred to discuss their best practices in teaching with each other. Newer agents were asking more experienced agents what learning methods they used at field days and other events. They also deeply discussed the differences between information dissemination and learning. It appeared the participants were more interested in learning from each other than answering the interview questions. However, the conversation helped them personally learn from each other to improve their work. This unfocus appeared to result from ongoing budget cuts that prevented them from seeing each other in a face-to-face venue.

Mental Health Services

I was involved with a series of focus groups sponsored by a county government to determine the best structure to deliver mental health services to county residents. The focus groups included users of mental health services, their caregivers, and the general public. One of the groups kept moving into discussions about the inefficiency of government due to poor elected leadership. One individual got irate when the facilitator repeatedly brought the conversation back to discussing mental health services. Eventually

the chair of the county board of supervisors removed the irate individual from the group so the conversation could focus on mental health services. In this instance, the unfocus helped me as a focus group facilitator better understand the importance of inviting the appropriate individuals to participate in groups including the potential pitfalls of involving a wide variety of perspectives. In this case I agree with Zuckerman-Parker and Shank (2008), "Sometimes, we choose to take bold and pioneering moves to extend our research practices, but, more often those moves are thrust upon us by virtue of circumstance" (p. 631). In this case, the unfocus helped me better understand focus group process best practices rather than insights on the phenomenon being discussed.

Benefits of Unfocus

What is the value of researcher or facilitator centered focus groups vs. participant centered focus groups? Smithson (2008) believes unfocus in a focus group can result in personal reflection, discovery of new things, and important networking for participants and the facilitator. I have personally found that unfocus can introduce new themes related to the goals of the project. For example, in the research project on how farmers learn, "unfocus times" surface an important theme on what motivates farmers to learn instead of just how they learn.

I also find unfocus in groups allows important issues often not directly tied to the project come into focus that may otherwise go unheard. This can help encourage conversation amongst participants who may otherwise have failed to participate. It may also increase participant satisfaction with the group and the group process.

Unfocus in focus groups can serve as a form of learning, release, or therapy for group members. Gaining deeper insight into varying opinions often results from this process. Items seen as nuances or absent in some groups may be magnified in unfocused groups.

An unfocused focus group can serve as an outlier to compare and contrast with other groups about the phenomenon under study. For this type of unfocus to be successful and safe, the facilitator must honor the needs and immediate wishes of the participants over their own and be sure the appropriate people have been selected for participation in the group.

Disadvantages of Unfocus

I have discovered a variety of disadvantages to unfocus in focus groups. Counter to what is taught in most focus group facilitator training, (i.e., keeping the group on task, sticking to the interview protocol [Kueger & Casey, 2009]) the facilitator relinquishes control of the conversational path and the main focus group questions may not be answered. Minority voices may feel unwelcomed and may close down or even have negative feelings about the entity sponsoring the focus groups that inhibit next steps with research or organizational development. In some instances, the project may need to refocus due to the topics arising in the conversations or more focus groups may need to be added to more fully understand the topics that surfaced. Summarizing key themes in data analysis may be more difficult or require deeper, more nuanced analysis.

Throughout the process of planning, conducting, and analyzing focus groups, unfocus can impact measures taken to ensure credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). For example, the focus group facilitator should conduct member checks frequently throughout the focus group and data analysis processes with participants to ensure the "unfocus" is being interpreted appropriately. Triangulation of data with additional sources of information other than the focus group such as observations, secondary data, and survey data can become critical to more fully understand and interpret the nuances of the focus group's discussion. Involving one or more members of the "unfocus" focus group in data analysis could help provide deeper clarity of their lived experience to enhance credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of the findings.

Participants in unfocused groups may become frustrated from not experiencing the original purpose of the group discussion so that full or authentic conversation on the phenomenon may not take place. As shown by the mental health services example, participants may become agitated and impede the group's discussion. Unfocus may cause mental and physical fatigue for the facilitator, potentially resulting in unwelcome stress or less than successful group discussion.

Lessons Learned and Approaches Taken

I have learned multiple lessons about facilitating unfocus in focus groups. It is important for focus groups to allow participants to connect with each and build trust before getting unfocused. I have also found that I, as a facilitator, need to be open to the role an unfocused focus group can have in surfacing important information. This requires being flexible as a focus group facilitator and having back up plans in case usual facilitation best practices fail.

Facilitators can recognize, encourage, and support unfocus by being open to co-learning with focus group participants rather than just serving as a facilitative expert. With this approach, facilitators should refrain from making quick judgment about the value of the unfocused discussion by being too quick to bring the group back to the original protocol. Time can be a friend or an enemy in this process as the facilitator weighs the advantages and disadvantages of staying on track versus taking enough time to develop issues or concepts deeply. I also have found it is important to realize there are often no right or wrong answers.

From an ethical perspective, facilitators need to be careful about power imbalances in the group that privilege similar voices. A probe I often use to balance voices in a group includes, "Do you all agree?" Keeping views balanced may require the facilitator to learn about the potential for noise or conflict ahead of time that could influence the group focus (e.g., history, budget, critical events, pre-existing group culture). Smithson (2008) suggests balance of perceptions can be achieved when she says, "The talk should be both highly focused on predefined topics and issues and at the same time spontaneous and conversational" (p. 365). However, unfocus may cause too few people to speak. I also find the timing of a focus group in the life or participants can be critical and that facilitator skills and interests may help or hinder unfocus

Encouraging or handing unfocus may simply require the facilitator who originally intends to use a structured focus group interview protocol to instead be flexible by

moving into a more semi-structured, conversational, or open ended focus group interview protocol as needed (Patton, 2001). The process of allowing and managing unfocus in a focus group may simply be a more advanced facilitation technique (Krueger, 2007).

Summary

Focus groups are valuable for gathering important information and insights on a phenomenon. Effective focus groups require well trained facilitators to navigate the social processes involved in this work. One facilitation practice reviewed with mixed opinions in the literature includes to what degree a facilitator allows a group to "unfocus" from the project or research topic. In many instances "unfocus" in a focus group can enhance understanding of the topic and context being studied. However, focus group facilitators need to be prepared for the surprises that "unfocus" can bring to the group process and ways to handle it successfully.

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